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## New Questions For Old Issues

By William H. Turner

Of all our studies, the systematic study of history rewards our efforts most. In no arena is this adage more appropriate than in the study of Black colleges in America. In order to properly understand the future of Black colleges and the questions faced by them, we need to study their history systematically. This has been abbreviated here, the gross generalizations have been truncated, and a point to the reference of their future is made.

There are many parameters of the questions raised about Black colleges in 1979. The essential point in all of them is a continuation of the questions raised when the institutionalization of Black life in America took foothold during the political compromises of Reconstruction—a process in which the establishment of colleges for Black students was just a “minor” part.

During the institutionalization of Black life in the United States (into caste-like structures), all aspects of dominant-minority life in America followed a similar pattern. Since this beginning, up to 1954, a constant and sometimes bitter struggle has been waged in resolving the aspects of this tension that Blacks have defined as disadvantageous to themselves. By 1954, the entire spectrum of worldwide “race relations” had changed to the point where minority groups (and the institutions that they comprise and which represent their entree on the social and political spectrum) no longer seek or define desegregation (as currently defined and practiced) as the caveat for the amelioration of their powerlessness and disadvantage.

The struggle has taken place not without much debate, litigation in the courts, and activism in the streets and in

the socio-political arenas. Black colleges, the focus of this analysis, have provided an education for thousands of Blacks up through 1954. The graduates of these colleges have become the very core of the leadership of the educated lot from this “minority” group. These colleges were the only avenues open up through 1954 to the majority of Blacks who wanted and used education. Even now, these colleges provide the only opportunity for most Blacks and many other students of limited means.

Those who would merge, consolidate, eliminate, and desegregate Black colleges (HEW and the federal policy bureaucrats, the various state parties to the desegregation process—both representing the collective overburdened taxpayers) want to disestablish the dual systems in higher education by desegregating the faculties, students, administrative staffs, nonacademic personnel, and governing boards.

Where these protagonists meet is on the limited grounds between plans for higher education in those states where Black colleges exist. One party to the debate takes the position that desegregation of higher education will not change the character of Black colleges . . . that the reconstruction to single systems will not compromise their historical missions to impact on the nation's social ills; nor lessen the opportunities provided by Black educational institutions to Blacks for individual advancement in the educational and occupational sectors.

The Black colleges take the position that desegregation will, in point of fact and practice—given the desegregation experience in the elementary-secondary sector—eliminate Blacks from the educational process altogether. As well, the process portends to silence one of the last organized political assemblies available to and at least symbolically controlled by Black people. It is therefore no small step to reach the conclusion that these questions pivot on the resolution of one central question: What is the place of Black institutional life in a desegregating society—the one having presented a historical image of exemplifying ethnic pluralism based on democracy.

For the privately-controlled Black colleges, those in the larger network of other “threatened” Black institutions, what societal/educational desegregation

will do and mean is not so much the concern as it is what it has already done.

Since 1954, the integration and widened access of Blacks to higher education has meant for them (the private Black colleges) a decrease in their virtual monopoly on the formerly segregated pool of college-bound students. For them, even if desegregation plans (OCR and Adams regulations) at the federal level are not implemented as they now stand, the larger question still looms as to whether Blacks themselves will choose private Black colleges at an enrollment level to sustain and increase federal, private, and philanthropic support in the name of diversity (pluralism) in desegregated higher education.

Will integrated society, in spite of its obvious ironies, come to mean that Black institutions are less attractive to Blacks because they too have come to accept the premise of desegregation ideology that anything all-Black is inherently inferior? What happens of the backlog of problems that continue to increase with respect to the growing number of colleges with majority Black enrollments? How long before they too are decreed anachronisms within the “white pluralism?” Ironically, they too face questions not too unlike the essence of these questions faced by the Black institutions that grew out of the first Reconstruction and the Jim Crow era.

Finally, we find that the Supreme Court, in a fashion like unto its 1954 role, will set the nation's guidelines for insuring or diminishing the Black colleges' role with respect to equal educational opportunity. In no small way, the forces, persons, and organizations taking us to this eventuality are the same ones who took us there in 1954. This time, it appears, the stakes are higher. And [W.E.B.] DuBois' “problem of the twentieth century” is less than a generation from resolution. History shows us what one of the parties to the question will do. And, the lessons tell us what the other must do. Fortunately, the middle ground has narrowed . . . leaving much less room for one to adjust itself (again!) or for the other parties to have reasons to justify (again!) their accommodation to the adjustments. □

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